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Mercury cleanup nearly complete

By Nina Voehl
Copy Editor

INDIAN HEAD — Clean up of seven pounds of poisonous mercury that spilled out of a ruptured sewer and contaminated about 20 tons of soil at the Naval Ordnance Station is nearly complete.

According to NOS public information officer Mike Ward, the metal, about a half pint, was discovered in August when a building contractor ruptured a sewer line, and the silvery metal gushed out into hundreds of tiny globules into a nearby trench, contaminating soil under reconstruction.

The mercury apparently had spilled into a sink in the Biazzi Chemical Plant Laboratory and into the sewer pipe. Navy officials were unaware when it happened, Ward said.

NOS is over 90 years old, and the metal could have been trapped in the pipes for years, Ward added. This is the first mercury spill to have occurred at the facility.

Mercury in extreme cases may cause birth defects and paralysis in humans when ingested in large amounts. It can get into the food chain through soil and water, therefore, the spill must be cleaned up thoroughly.

The drain in the lab has been plugged to prevent further discharge of mercury into the sewer and soil, and the lab is back in normal operation, Ward said.

Contaminated soil is being hauled away in barrels to a hazardous

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Maryland Waste Management Administration

disposal site in Ohio, he added, and the excavation area has been roped off and covered with plywood and plastic and restricted until soil tests and the state determine the area is safe. Further the sewer line has been rerouted away from the spill site.

Ward could not say specifically when the clean-up would be complete other than "very shortly."

The *Washington Post* reported that cost of the clean-up was more than \$100,000, but Ward said he "did not know where that figure came from" and that the process is ongoing. Costs will not be determined until the job is finished.

One "very small area" still shows contamination, John Koontz, head of enforcement for the Maryland Waste Management Administration, said.

Although the spill occurred in August, the Navy did not begin to excavate the contaminated soil until October or notify state health officials and the Environmental Protection

Agency of the spill until 30 days after its discovery.

Usually, Koontz said, health officials are notified of hazardous waste spills in a much shorter time frame. Nov. 27, his office sent the Navy a formal notice to clean up the site, and the county health department received a copy of the order.

Ward said the delay in notification was due to a "question of dual authority," between the station's mercury control officer and the environmental control officer, as to who was responsible for the report. The latter was on leave at the time of the incident, Ward explained.

According to both Ward and Koontz, the spill was considered minor and posed no threat beyond the spill area, therefore, local officials were not immediately notified. NOS was required in this case to only notify Navy, EPA and state health officials. The county would not have been notified if the state had not filed the complaint

notice, Koontz said.

James Story, local environmental health officer, said NOS has always been "open" in recent years with any potential health hazards at the plant. In this case, NOS did not give a "courtesy contact," since it was only required to notify state and federal officials.

Thus far all tests have indicated no danger to any water supplies, Story said. NOS is being "overly cautious" in the clean-up process which is costly and timely, he added.

Koontz said the clean up demonstrates the importance of the time and cost to remove even small amounts of hazardous materials.

"When (mercury) shows up in its pure state it can contaminate a lot of land," Koontz emphasized. "Industrial chemicals when put in the wrong place and then put in the right place...becomes expensive."

Koontz suggested that NOS have "better management of its laboratory operation" to prevent future occurrence of similar incidents.

In the meantime, Koontz added, the Navy is conducting a major engineering study to determine the best way to treat the industrial wastes produced at the plant and assess the effects of past forms of waste disposal.

Rocket motors, ammunition, propellants and explosives are produced at NOS for the Navy.